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ABSTRACT

Creative writers have moved into the mainstream of English departments without understanding or reviewing their own history, and without reconceptualizing graduate and undergraduate creative writing programs. Such a history can be constructed from sources in three areas: institutional history, creative writing history, and rhetorical history. An institutional history of English studies outlines the displacement of the classical education with the philological, linguistic study of English, changes in the undergraduate population, the narrowing conception of what literature includes, and the stratification of literature and composition within English departments. The development of creative writing courses at the University of Iowa provides the archetypal story of the development of creative writing within the discipline of English studies. It also demonstrates the widespread perception that teaching is an unnecessary area of concern for graduate writing programs, since writers (in this view) can be nurtured but not really taught. In the 1960s, current-traditional rhetoric was challenged by subjective theories of instruction not dissimilar to those promulgated in graduate creative writing workshops. The history of writing instruction in America makes it clear that writing instruction has lived an artificially divided life within English studies. Lively controversies afoot in English departments (regarding literary theory and practice, feminist and Marxist critiques of English studies, and composition research and theory) should inform the work of teachers of creative writing. (A six-page appendix lists resources for teaching creative writing.) (SR)

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Wendy Bishop
Preconvention Workshop: Alternatives for the Creative Writing Classroom
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On Being in the Same Boat: A History of Creative Writing and Composition Writing in American Universities

Since the late 1930s, most creative writing professors have been publishing authors who teach graduate students about the world of contemporary letters. In Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs--and more recently in English Ph.D. programs offering creative dissertation options--many promising apprentice writers gather to craft poetry, prose, or drama and share it with peers and with their master-writer/mentor-teacher in a workshop setting. Due to this steady movement of American writers into lifelong academic careers, today "colleges are where most of our writers can be found" (Stegner 51).

However, it often seems that creative writers have moved into the mainstream of English departments without understanding or reviewing their own history--as part of a changing academic discipline called English studies--and without reconceptualizing graduate and undergraduate creative writing programs. Creative writing teachers are, of necessity, implicated in questions of theory and practice, primarily because they now teach large numbers of students at the undergraduate level. And these students vary widely in their needs and interests. For instance, undergraduate students may possess scant knowledge of writing processes or of writing products. Especially problematic, many of these students come from different cultural backgrounds than their teachers and have acquaintance with and value for a range of noncanonical literatures--from popular romance novels to oral storytelling to rap poetry to religious texts to TV sitcoms--and enjoy those literatures in a variety of languages and dialects.

It is important, then, to review of the history of college writing instruction--a history that is, however, difficult to come by. I present one version here, as I have been able to glean the details from sources in three areas: writers about institutional history (Arthur Applebee, Terry Eagleton,

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Gerald Graff, and Robert Scholes), creative writing history (George Garrett, Wallace Stegner, and Stephen Wilbers), and rhetorical history (James Berlin, Robert Connors, and Anne Ruggles Gere). The difficulty I have experienced trying to trace these sometimes overlapping, sometimes widely diverging, historical strands suggests more of us should be examining the ways our institutional pasts inform our teaching presents.

During the early 19th century, a college education in America meant primarily a classical, undergraduate education--the study of Latin, Greek, math, history, logic, theology and natural science--and was reserved for the nation's all male elite, aspiring doctors, lawyers and, especially, ministers (Graff 22-23). Theirs was an "oratorical culture," classical texts were anatomized, memorized, and recited. The English language and English texts were not considered proper subjects for rigorous intellectual study.

The study of English literature, as we practice it in the late 20th century, began in British universities in a slow and piecemeal manner, and for many reasons that seem surprising today. Early on, the study of English literature was a proper undertaking for women, who were beginning to enter the university system, and for working class men attending "Mechanics' Institutes." Literature was valued not in the college lecture hall but on the popular lecture circuits and within informal study groups (Eagleton 27).

In his book Literary Theory, Terry Eagleton's reading of the invention of what we now call literature studies is made from a British and, admittedly, Marxist viewpoint. "Literature," he says, "in the meaning of the world we have inherited, is an ideology" (22). In England, the eventual canonization of certain texts was socially expedient, and Eagleton suggests the growth of English during the late 19th century is a not-unexpected result of the failure of religion. Over time, there has been a narrowing from a broader field, which once included essays, sermons, histories, letters, journals, poetry and novels

to a literature which includes letters, journals, poetry and novels to a literature which includes only what we now term "imaginative" (Eagleton 1-16).

In America, the study of literature and the development of our familiar English departments, occurred with the displacement of the existing oratorical, classical culture. The effectiveness of the classical college education was challenged on many fronts, but it clearly disappears during the last quarter of the 19th century with the development of administrative "departments" of language and literature and the creation of graduate programs. At this point, the classical college becomes the new University.

Gerald Graff attributes much of this change to secularization and the rise of a scientific educational model, as American colleges began to reform themselves, taking after the German universities and assuring that the study of English would take on a philological, linguistic, emphasis. The drive for professionalism resulted in graduate programs whn h commenced "in the image of the great European universities" (Graff 57). Johns Hopkins instituted the first effective graduate school model which was imitated by Harvard, Yale and the University of Chicago. The developing graduate programs of the late 1870s, in turn, reinforced a new vision of academic professionalism by calling for programs in which instructors "could not become so 'absorbed in routine' that they would be 'forced to spend their strength in the discipline of tyros,' as they were doing in the old college. Instead, they 'should have ample time to carry on the higher work for which they had shown themselves qualified'" (Graff 57).

Equally important, during the 1870s, the new university evolved from the classical college because undergraduate education was now being offered to any student who could "meet the entrance requirements (a growing number, due to the new free high schools), offering upward mobility through certification in such professions as agriculture, engineering, journalism, social work, education,

and a host of other new professional pursuits" (Berlin 21).

English department stratification--graduate programs for the professional scholar--undergraduate programs for the mass of new college students--was supported by the implementation in 1874 of "a test of the student's ability to write in English as a part of the Harvard entrance requirement" (Berlin Rhetoric 23). Such testing assured that the burden of writing preparation would be returned to (or blamed on) the developing free high schools which were producing these large new ranks of undergraduate college students. Earlier in the century, rhetoric (proficiency in oratory and writing) had required years of upper division course work. When rhetoric was no longer viewed as the necessary acquisition of and finishing touch for the best educated minds, rhetoric was delegated to freshman composition and soon wished upon high school teachers. Where formerly expertise in writing assumed a student's long apprenticeship, the writer in the late 19th century was suddenly perceived of as needing to acquire a set of surface level skills that could be applied by teachers-as-technicians.

The freshman composition sequence was started at Harvard in 1874. The development of such a course represents a "devalorizing of the writing course in the curriculum." Devalorization was to continue for the next one hundred years (Berlin Rhetoric 20). The newly designated "freshman composition" teacher became the overworked, undervalued member of the developing English department, correcting untold numbers of themes for a newly visible body of seemingly underprepared students (Berlin Rhetoric 21).

The complex history of composition instruction during the twentieth century is not essential here, but it is worth sketching in overview. Current-traditional rhetoric, an objective (scientific) view of instruction which assumes that "reality [resides] in the material world, in the material objects of experience" (Berlin Rhetoric 6) came to dominate the classroom. This

view of writing instruction narrows classical rhetorical aims from invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery down to arrangement and style, placing an unnatural emphasis on "the patterns of arrangement and superficial correctness [as] the main ends of writing instruction" (Berlin Rhetoric 9). Not until the 1960s was this pedagogy successfully challenged, resulting in subjective (expressionistic) and transactional (classical, cognitive, and epistemic) theories of writing instruction.

Meanwhile, of course, Americans were still writing "imaginative" literature outside of the academy and within it. Non-academic writing groups flourished as early as 1753 (Gere 14). These groups developed in most university communities, including the Universities of Wisconsin and Iowa. And purely "imaginative" writing entered the curriculum: "Iowa's first course in creative writing, entitled 'Verse-Making Class,' [was offered] in the spring of 1897" (Wilbers 20).

The development of creative writing courses at the University of Iowa provides the archetypal story of the development of creative writing within the discipline of English studies, although programs developed, also, at other institutions. Wallace Stegner notes the concurrent rise of conferences like the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, but the primary influence on American creative writing programs remains the graduate writing degrees like those instituted at Iowa. There Norman Foerster began the "School of Letters," allowing the first M.A. creative theses and dissertations from 1931 onward (the MFA degree was first conferred in 1941). Forester's justification for this program reflected a movement away from the scientific, philological roots of English studies toward a more scholarly professional view of the discipline It reflected a desire among practicing writers (and some students of literature) to include living authors in the literary canon. In fact, these courses adopted the methods of non-academic writers' groups and included visits by "famous" living authors,

the sharing of and responding to each members' work, and so on--the workshop approach.

Those who created and nurtured the Iowa workshop in its first year believed:

> [T]hat "no university could undertake to turn out writers as it produces physicians, lawyers, chemists, and teachers." He [Wilber Schramm, first director of the Writers' Workshop] observed that a man [sic] cannot be taught "to write, or for that matter, to practice any profession," but that "the teacher directs, aids, encourages; the student learns by his own effort." The necessary program for the university, then, was simply to "open the riches of the university to the young writer".... (Wilbers 62)

This description reflects an essentially romantic, subjective view of literary creation and writing instruction; writers can be nurtured but not really taught. In his own writings, Norman Foerster warns us away from pedagogy:

> And let us not create an elaborate system of courses in imaginative writing, but rather keep the relationship as simple as possible. The 'teaching' of writing, as has already been suggested, is essentially a relationship of apprentice and master. The most important requirement is that the 'master' be a wise man [sic] who has been or is a practicing artist and has learned to read with an artist's eyes. (210)

In these views, <u>teaching</u> is a relatively unnecessary area of concern for graduate writing programs. These perceptions have held steady for many years in the world of academic creative writing.

In the Iowa model, the best young writers in America were to enter the academic system at the top--through graduate programs. And, from the late 1930s on, these programs flourished. Creative writing programs were at first vitalized and then transformed, though, by an influx of students. Due to the financial support of the GI Bill, colleges and universities were filled by

"millions of young Americans, back from the wars, who wanted to read the literature of their own age, and who demanded it" (Garrett 49). In the 1950s, the GIs helped change the study of literature and swelled the ranks of creative writing programs.

The Iowa program produced many fine, publishing authors--in Midland: Twenty-Five Years of Fiction and Poetry from the Writing Workshops of the State University of Iowa--workshop director Paul Engle celebrates them in a sonorous roll call. In his own roll call of successful graduates of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Stephen Wilbers, intentionally notes those writer/alumni who have gone to other universities and colleges to start graduate and undergraduate programs in creative writing. Undergraduate workshops had been instituted at Iowa as early as 1949 while course offerings were broadened in 1957 to help the "many graduate students [who] were handicapped in their attempts at creative writing by a poor background in literature" (Wilbers 97). However, as graduates from the writing programs moved into other universities, they would not have academic positions unless they could generate an interest in undergraduate instruction in creative writing. By instituting undergraduate workshops, MFA trained writers, though, were increasingly faced with more varied students drawn from a broader set of open-admissions applicants.

From the 1940s to the present, "professional" writers have remained in English departments for various reasons. More and more, they stay because the situation is familiar and English departments represent--relatively--friendly territory, these writers having themselves come of age in writing programs. "The combination of modest academic salaries plus the incremental additions that were potentially available through grants, fellowships, prizes, awards, and, above all, public readings added up to a kind of precarious security for writers..." (Garrett 53).

As the numbers of graduate and undergraduate creative writing programs

increased, the need for a professional organization became apparent; in the 1960s R.V. Cassill organized the Associated Writing Programs (AWP). Interestingly, successful graduate programs like Iowa, did not rush to become charter members of AWP (Garrett 55). This period coincides with a burgeoning undergraduate enrollment in most American colleges, an enrollment that also revolutionized the teaching of composition. It is in the 1960s, then, that the intersection of creative writing and composition studies becomes especially important; teachers in these areas began, regularly, to teach the same undergraduates.

Professional organizations for composition teachers had developed much earlier than did AWP. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) began in 1911. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) formed as a special interest group of that organization with its first meeting held in 1947. As for members of NCTE and CCCC, members of AWP were responding to a marked growth of their profession and to the complicated issues engendered by such growth. That is, it was not until creative writing blossomed into a graduate and undergraduate system that professional management through AWP seemed called for in order to serve the many degree-holding writers who were (re)turning to the university for academic employment. Currently, membership in AWP is still increasing, representing a greater number of programs and writers each year.

This already long, brief introduction to the history of writing instruction in America cannot encompass a full discussion of English studies in the 1960s. The rise of alternative critical theories challenged the dominance of New Critical methodology and has been described in Graff's Professing Literature. During the same period there occurred a surge of professional growth in composition studies which is best understood by reading James Berlin's Rhetoric and Reality; essentially, current-traditional rhetoric was challenged by

subjective theories of instruction that were not dissimilar to those promulgated in graduate creative writing workshops. Writing was advocated as a medium for self-knowledge and self-expression; models for instruction were varied and experimental, including a workshop approach as well as the "'happening,' an art form distinguished by its making the audience part of its very existence" (150 Berlin). Published in 1973, Peter Elbow's influential book Writing without Teacher both results from and illustrates the changes in pedagogical thinking of the period. In its most idealistic manifestation--power to the writer as well as power to the people--writing instruction was revisualized; it should serve students and no longer be utilized as a way to discriminate against students.

Working against student empowerment, in many senses, has been the dominance of literature studies and, perhaps, an over-valuation of the importance of graduate scholarship and research. Over the last two hundred years, literature has moved from its place as a product for popular consumption to a property of the scholarly elite. Not everyone is allowed to write imaginative literature. "We may consume "literature," which comes from outside our classrooms, but we cannot produce literature in classes, nor can we teach its production. Instead, we teach something called "creative writing"--the production of psuedo-literary texts" (Scholes 5). The dominance of "literature" is maintained by having an Other--both creative writing and composition--with which favorably to compare itself. In a similar way, creative writing has an Other--composition--to which it feels superior. Writers of modern imaginative texts have had a long-standing desire to align themselves with privileged texts (literature) and have preferred to see themselves as having little in common with teachers of a further debased type of text--composition or psuedo-non-literature" in Scholes's hierarchical description. In this sense, writing instruction has lived an artificially divided life within English studies.

Today, in English departments, lively controversies are afoot. There has been a rapid growth in literary theory and practice, feminist and Marxist critiques of English studies, and composition research and theory (including a movement from expressionist rhetorics to a more sophisticated model now called transactional, with variants termed social-constructivist and epistemic [see Berlin]). These developments are changing English Studies and thinking in these areas should inform our work as teachers of creative writing. Here is our opportunity to participate in the exciting (although admittedly contentious) academic growth we seem to be needing.

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Wendy Bishop
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